

India Benefit Sharing Event Report

A 4-day conference held at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, January 2015

The Music Box and its Reverberations: Technology and Music in India

The India event for the Music Digitisation Mediation project was a four day international conference, “The Music Box and its Reverberations: Technology and Music in India,” organized in collaboration with the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (SAA, JNU), New Delhi. Jawaharlal Nehru University is the leading research university for Humanities and Social Sciences in India, and the School of Arts and Aesthetics is one of the few departments that shares interests in the core questions of the ‘Music Digitisation Mediation’ ERC research programme, which was part funding the event. The conference provided the first platform to bring together dispersed academic and practitioner perspectives on the broad topic of music and technology in India, and in doing so it fulfilled a crucial aspect of benefit sharing.

The conference was held at the SAA auditorium in the JNU campus from 14-17 January 2015. It began with two preparatory workshops and two keynotes on 14 Jan, given by Prof. Jonathan Sterne from McGill University, Canada, and Prof. Georgina Born, Oxford University, UK; both are leading international figures in the burgeoning fields of sound studies, music, media and technology studies, and digital music studies. The two workshops introduced a large group of Indian graduate students and academic faculty interested in developing research and interventions in these areas to the growth and substantive focus of these fields. The plan was to help to initiate further academic developments in these areas in India through the events. This was followed by three intensive days of academic panels during the day and music performances in the evening. The 55 invited speakers and participants included prominent scholars from universities across India, USA, UK, Canada and New Zealand, as well as Indian practitioners from the music and film industries, as well as from professional and voluntary work in music archiving and performance. The conference was supported by contributions from the MusDig programme as well as by funds raised by SAA from JNU, the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), and the Indian Ministry of Culture. These generous contributions allowed for the various events to be free to all. Over the course of four days, as a result, about three hundred attendees benefitted from the conference and the accompanying performances.

The conference booklet is appended to this webpage: it gives full details of all the sessions, papers given and contributors to the conference. It also details the evening music performances.

The collaborative planning of the event took one year; the core committee involved throughout this period included Prof Ira Bhaskar, Dr Kaushik Bhaumik, and Vebhuti Duggal from SAA, JNU, and Prof Georgina Born and Dr Aditi Deo from the Music Digitization Mediation programme. Other committee members who played important roles in its development were Prof Bishnupriya Dutt, Anubhuti Sharma and Anugyan Nag from

SAA. Since it was organized in the SAA auditorium, the conference benefitted immensely from the community of SAA faculty, students and staff, as well as from SAA departmental infrastructure for administrative work, publicity, recording, etc. We would like publicly to record our great thanks for the wonderful support of this large group of organisers and helpers, without which the event could not have been as ambitious and successful as it was.

On 14 January, as mentioned, the School of Arts and Aesthetics also organized a two-session workshop for its students and faculty with Prof. Jonathan Sterne and Prof. Georgina Born on the topics, respectively, of Sound Studies and Music, Sound and Space. Both sessions were well attended by students in JNU as well as other universities in Delhi, and received enthusiastic feedback from the attendees.

The conference was inaugurated in the evening by the vice-chancellor of JNU and an introduction to the MusDig project by Georgina Born. The highlight of the evening was the two-keynote session, “Music, Technology, Aesthetics: A Conversation across Disciplines,” by Jonathan Sterne and Georgina Born chaired by Prof Amlan Dasgupta of Jadavpur University, Kolkata. This was followed by a reception dinner where conference participants and invitees had the opportunity to interact before the conference began in full swing.

The following three days were divided more or less thematically, with panels/roundtables on the first day focusing on oral traditional musics (classical and vernacular), on the second day on music and film industries, and on the third day addressing questions centered on business practices, sound studies, etc. Through historical and ethnographic material, the presentations examined how diverse technologies of sound reproduction had mediated musical practices over the course of the past century in India. Each of the days culminated in a music concert that spoke to one of the themes in the scope of the conference. We are immensely grateful to the performers who contributed not only their musical and creative skills, but stayed with us throughout the conference and participated in the general discussions.

The first day of the conference, 15 January, consisted of three panels—“Hindustani Classical Music: Histories, Sounds, Technology” on north Indian classical (Hindustani) music, “Music in South India: Shifting Aesthetic Paradigms in the Early Twentieth Century” on historical intersections between music and technologies in southern India, and “Vernacular Music Practices: Culture, Media, Politics” that ethnographically examined technological shifts in the context of vernacular musics in north India. The panels were followed by a roundtable moderated by Dr Shubha Chaudhuri, one of India’s most senior archiving professionals and a field interlocutor on the MusDig India research, that brought together music archivists and record collectors in a discussion about the impact of digital technologies on their practices. Renowned Carnatic vocalist Bombay Jayashri Ramnath and her accompanists performed in the evening to a full house in the School of Social Sciences (SSS) auditorium, JNU.

The second day of the conference, 16 January, began with the panel “‘Meri Awaaz Suno’ [‘Listen to my Voice’]: Cinematic and Aural Stardoms,” that addressed music and cinema

in the Hindi and Tamil film industries. The roundtable “Technologically Yours: Film Music and Sound Practices” moderated by Prof Ira Bhaskar traced recent shifts in creative musical practices in the Hindi film industry through conversations with music composers and sound designers about their compositions. The next panel, “Seeing Print, Hearing Film: Reception Histories of Music and Sound,” picked key historical moments and technologies in the circulation of film music and sound to expand on sound/music’s relationships with concurrent media practices. The last panel of the day, “After the Great Divide: Digitization and the Vernacular Music Industries,” turned attention to recent socio-economic transformations in vernacular music industries with the proliferation of small-scale digital studios. The evening concert at the SSS auditorium featured singer Moushumi Bhowmik and multi-instrumentalist Satyaki Banerjee whose performances incorporate their research on folk music in West Bengal and Bangladesh.

The last day of the conference began with a continuation of the theme of music-based industries, with the panel “The Business of Sounds: Music Industries, Retailing, Piracy” that explored legal and extralegal business practices centered on music consumption. The following panel, “Fiddling with the Dials: Radio, Performance and Listening Cultures,” focused on the circulation of music on analog and Internet radio, and the construction of listening communities through these media. The next panel, “Noise, Technology and Music,” was aimed at viewing Indian contexts through Sound Studies approaches; given that one of the two presenters was unable to attend, in the second slot of the panel Profs Jonathan Sterne and Lakshmi Subramanian summarized the various themes that had emerged over the course of the conference. The last panel, “Electronic Music Cultures,” presented new pedagogic and creative practices centered on electronic communication and consumption cultures. After this, a formal vote of thanks was given by Georgina Born on behalf of the MusDig project and Kaushik Bhaumik on behalf of the SAA, JNU and the conference was concluded. The evening performance at SSS Auditorium by film composer Arijit Datta and Zohran Miranda included their original compositions for film and live concerts.

The event received unanimously positive responses from participants and other attendees for not only offering an opportunity for academic conversations on its core theme—technology and music in the Indian context, both historically and today—but also for making possible a rare assembly of scholars and practitioners. As insightful as the academic presentations, roundtables and concerts were the multiple informal conversations between scholars, students, musicians, archivists and technologists over the course of the few days of the conference, which we hope will contribute to building a momentum to take forward these areas of research and scholarship within Indian academia as well as creating ongoing fruitful links between academic research and practitioners.

Aditi Deo
Georgina Born
17 March 2015.